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AUTHOR Paw, Terry T.; Goldsmith, Douglas P.
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ABSTRACT

Little research has examined the relationships between parents' perceptions of their adolescent children, the adolescents' self-perceptions and the congruence of those perceptions to adolescent behavior problems. Two parent families (N=64) with an adolescent member completed a Behavior Adjustment Scale. Based on these scores 42 families were selected for study, 14 families whose adolescent member exhibited serious behavior problems and 28 families whose adolescent member exhibited no significant behavior problems. An adolescent-perception score for each mother, father, and adolescent was computed on the seven personal description dimensions of the Adjective Self-Description instruments, i.e., attitude, behavior, efficiency, orientation, anxiety, ideology, and social attractiveness. Findings indicated that greater incongruence existed between the self- and parental-perception of adolescents identified as exhibiting behavior problems, suggesting that incongruent interpersonal perceptions may have an impact on behavior and communications. Some adolescents attempted to resolve the incongruity by living up, or down, to the expectations of their parents or by resisting information incongruent with their self-perceptions by withdrawal from interpersonal communications. (NRB)

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Inter-Personal Perceptions Within Families
Containing Behavior Problem Adolescents

Terry T. Faw and Douglas F. Goldsmith
Lewis and Clark College
Portland, Oregon 97219

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Inter-Personal Perceptions Within Families Containing Behavior Problem Adolescents

An often stated assumption is that adolescent behavior problems are associated with poor patterns of adolescent-parent communications. Furthermore, it is assumed that effective communication is facilitated by congruent interpersonal perceptions, i.e., the parents' perception of the adolescent is congruent with the adolescent's self-perception. Although some research has indicated that adolescents who identify themselves as misunderstood by their parents possess lower self-esteem than adolescents who identify themselves as understood by their parents (Bledsoe and Wiggins, 1973); surprisingly, little research has been undertaken to examine the relationship between parent's actual perception of their adolescent and the adolescent's self-perception or to relate the congruence of those perceptions to adolescent behavior problems. The purpose of the present study was to examine those relationships.

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Method

Subjects:

The initial subject pool consisted of 64 two parent families containing at least one adolescent between the ages of 14 and 18 years. Families were solicited from high schools serving predominately white, middle class, socioeconomic populations.

Instrumentation:

Behavior Adjustment - A modified version of the Check List of Behavior Deviations in Children with Adjustment Problems (Christiansen, 1967) was administered to each parent. This check list describes 37 behaviors associated with childhood and adolescent adjustment problems and in its original form asked teachers to indicate those behaviors characteristic of the target child or adolescent. With minor wording changes the instrument is appropriate for parental responding. A high correlation (.84) was found between the number of behaviors checked by mothers and fathers; thus a single Behavior Adjustment Score was determined by adding the individual check list scores of the two parents.

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Person Perception - The Adjective Self-Description (Veldman, 1971) was used to assess both the adolescent's self-perception and the parents' perception of their adolescent. The Adjective Self-Description contains 56 adjectives each of which is rated on a 5 point Leckert Scale as to its accuracy in describing a target individual. The 56 adjectives assess 7 dimensions of personal description: (1) attitude--good natured, gentle, (2) behavior--rude, irresponsible, (3) efficiency--organized, steady, (4) orientation--timid, loud, (5) anxiety--nervous, worrying, (6) ideology--individualistic, idealistic, (7) social attractiveness--charming, clever. For each respondent a single score is obtained for each of the 7 dimensions by computing the mean rating for adjectives identified with the dimension.

Each parent filled out the Adjective Self-Description with instructions to describe their adolescent son or daughter. In turn, each adolescent filled out the form describing him/herself.

Procedure:

Based on the adolescent's Behavior Adjustment Score, 14 families were identified as containing an adolescent with behavior problems (Behavior Adjustment Score ≥ 10), while 28 families were identified as containing an adolescent without significant behavior problems (Behavior Adjustment Score ≤ 4). All subsequent analyses are based on those 42 families. The distribution of ages in the two groups was not found to differ significantly ($p = .62$) with the mean age of the non-behavior problem and the behavior problem samples being 16.2 and 16.7 years respectively. Among the 14 behavior problem subjects the sexes were equally represented, while 20 of the 28 adolescents who did not exhibit behavior problems were females. Analyses undertaken separately for the two sexes did not reveal differential patterns of results; consequently, all subsequent results and discussions pertained to the combined sexes within each group.

Once having identified the two comparative groups, the mother's, father's and adolescent's

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adolescent-perception score was computed in each family for each of the 7 personal description dimensions and for each parent the adolescent-perception discrepancy scores were computed for each of those dimensions by subtracting the parent's adolescent-perception score from that of the adolescent.

Results:

A canonical correlation between the 7 personal description scores for mothers and fathers was calculated as .87 ($p < .001$). Canonical correlations were also calculated between the adolescents' adolescent-perception scores and those of the adolescents' mothers and fathers. Those correlations for mothers and fathers were .78 and .73 respectively.

A discriminate analysis was undertaken to determine if self-perception for the 7 dimensions of personal description distinguished adolescents identified as exhibiting behavior problems from their peers who had not been identified as exhibiting behavior problems. That analysis revealed no significant discriminative function ($p > .05$).

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Separately for each parent a discriminate analysis was undertaken to determine if, on the basis of the adolescent-perception discrepancy scores for the 7 dimensions of personal description, those adolescents identified as exhibiting behavior problems were discriminable from those not so described. Each of those analyses resulted in the identification of a significant discriminative function ($p < .001$). Canonical correlations between group placement and the adolescents-perception discrepancy scores for mothers and fathers were .54 and .62 respectively.

Identical patterns of univariate discrimination were observed for both parents with significant univariate F ratios found for the dimensions of efficiency, (mothers: $F = 14.97$, fathers: $F = 17.31$, $p < .01$), social attractiveness (mothers: $F = 7.11$, fathers: $F = 9.70$, $p < .05$), and attitude (mothers: $F = 8.38$, fathers: $F = 6.63$, $p < .05$). For each dimension the parents of adolescents identified as exhibiting behavior problems reported more negative

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perceptions of their children than did the parents of adolescents not identified as exhibiting behavior problems.

Discussion:

The observed results are in keeping with the assumption that greater incongruence exists between the self and parental perception of adolescents identified as exhibiting behavior problems than between the self and parental perception of adolescents who have not been identified as exhibiting behavior problems. Although the preliminary nature of these findings precludes an extended discussion of their theoretical and practical implications, their potential significance stems from the impact which incongruent interpersonal perceptions may have on behavior and communications. The behavioral implications of the incongruence is articulated by Bledsoe and Wiggins who note that when parents' perception of their adolescents differs from the adolescent's self-perception the adolescent may attempt to resolve the incongruity by living up (or in the case of the adolescents in the present study down) to the level of expectation held by the

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parent (Beldsoe and Wiggins, 1973). The implication of this incongruence in inter-personal communications follows from Coopersmith and other "self" theorists' contention that individuals are tenacious in their attempts to resist information incongruent with their self-perception. That resistance may take the form of terminating communications by withdrawing from inter-personal contact or passively punishing the information source. Neither of these acts is conducive to creating effective family relations nor facilitating adolescent development. Thus, the results of this study suggest the importance in adolescent family counseling of initially identifying incongruent inter-personal perceptions and their role in the presenting problems.

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Footnote

Critical values of the univariate F ratios are calculated to insure that the maximum probability of type I error for any of the individual comparisons is equal to α . (Harris, 1975, 73-74).